

Doctoral Writing Needs Style and Substance

Stylish writing is often sidelined in favour of academic seriousness. Yet in an age where research must seek to connect with those it serves, **Dr Melanie Petch** argues that writing well has never been more important for doctoral researchers from all disciplines.

In the dystopian fiction *Submission*, the speaker makes an interesting observation on the nature of academic study: it exists, he says, “solely to replicate itself”. Within many academic domains, there are rules for writing that all good researchers are expected to absorb and replicate. Stylish writing is often swept aside in favour of perceived academic seriousness. Can doctoral writing be academically sound – relevant, interrogative, analytical – and still beautiful? In an age of impact, stylish writing is vital, if only to connect with the public audience it must also serve.

Learn the art of storytelling

Could you relate a prick on the finger in *Sleeping Beauty* to immunology and fighting infection? Could current news stories lead you into a discussion of your own research? Used appropriately, stories have the potential to connect research with a wider audience and draw the reader in.

Have “something to talk about (the topic) and something to say about it (the point)”

The topic provides focus for your discussion, whereas the ‘point’ becomes the discussion itself. Ask ‘Why is this topic significant to my area of research?’ and ‘How will this topic inform, or shape my research?’.

Build pace and rhythm

Have you ever found yourself racing to read a text, your heart thumping with excitement? If so, your author has managed to create energy in the sequencing of their ideas. One way of creating pace is to finish chapters with the most innovative areas of your work. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes argues that concealing is more seductive than revealing. Your writing should create energy in the suspense that the best is yet to come.

Build rapport with your reader

Clear and Simple as the Truth discusses the need for a ‘symmetrical relationship’ between reader and writer. Knowledge of the research topic should be unfolded by reader and doctoral writer. Useful phrases to evoke symmetry are “As we considered earlier...” or “Let us now turn to the idea that...”. All in all, we aim for a compassionate relationship with our reader that evokes transparency and a generous spirit.



Allegoric representation of the challenges of research writing.

Avoid unnecessary meta-narrative

By meta-narrative, I mean those clunky sentences that so often litter writing to ‘help’ the reader. Agreed, doctoral writing requires some signposting as the thesis is a long document: for example, “Chapter Two also refers to...” However, signposting is not necessary in every other paragraph, as this endangers the natural flow of your argument.

Show enthusiasm

There is something endearing about a writer who shows genuine excitement for their research. Look at the following example: “We might argue that all researchers are highly confident writers. This is all well and good, but are we making vast assumptions here? Let us turn to the evidence.” The question adds interest, and demonstrates curiosity. With each sentence, the reader moves forwards rather than halting to take in each idea.

Stylish writing is a skill that can be mastered with practise, and much can be learned from deconstructing the language of the writers you enjoy. What makes it so enjoyable? What stylistic tips can you borrow? Give these ideas a go. Let me know how you get on.

Melanie Petch has worked in researcher development supporting PhD students for nearly ten years, and specialises in doctoral writing. She has published on writing in the arts, the experience of being a PhD student, and the connection between philosophy and writing practices.